SPORT

Al-Hilal down Al-Gharafa to stay perfect in Asian CL

DOHA: Al-Hilal secured a 2-1 win over Qatar's Al-Gharafa in Doha on Monday as the Saudi Pro League side continued their perfect start to the western league phase of the Asian Champions League Elite.

A ninth-minute header from Salem Al-Dawsari sent Simone Inzaghi's side on their way to victory, the Al-Hilal captain nodding in Joao Cancelo's clipped centre from the right byline.

Kaio Cesar doubled the visitors' lead in the 66th minute when he beat Khalifa Ababacar from distance while Ayoub Al-Ouwi's 97th minute strike was not enough to stop Al-Hilal notching up a fourth victory in a row.

The win takes Al-Hilal to 12 points, two clear of second-placed Al-Wahda from the United Arab Emirates in the 12-team standings. The top eight finishers in the league phase advance to March's knockout rounds.

Qatar's Al-Duhail claimed their first victory in the competition with a 4-1 thrashing of Paulo Sousa's previously unbeaten Shabab Al-Ahli with Edmilson Junior setting his side up for victory with a superb early strike.

The Belgium-born Qatar international burst down the left before cutting inside to bend a right-footed strike into the top corner with two minutes on the clock.

Benjamin Bourigeaud thumped home a second from 25 yards six minutes before the interval although Breno Cascardo's header halved the deficit three minutes later.

But an emphatic 57th minute strike by Adil Boulbina restored Al-Duhail's two-goal cushion and Luis Alberto sealed the win two minutes into added time.

"This is our first win in the Asian Champions League and all of the team played very well," said Edmilson Junior. "When we play like that we are a good team and we need to keep going in this way."

Al-Wahda needed an 89th minute header from substitute Caio Canedo to pick up a 2-1 win over Uzbekistan's Nasaf in Qarshi as the side from the UAE battled back to claim third win of the campaign.

Nasaf had taken the lead through Sardorbek Bakhromov's perfectly struck curling effort but Al-Wahda equalised through Favour Ogbu's header seven minutes into the second half. The game looked to be heading for a draw until Caio pounced at close range to head in the winner after goalkeeper Abduvohid Nematov had saved Mohammad Ghorbani's initial effort.

Iran's Tractor FC, meanwhile, moved up to third when Dragan Skocic's side sealed a narrow 1-0 win over Al-Shorta from Iraq. —Reuters

NEWCASTLE: Players of Newcastle United attend a practice session at the Newcastle United Training Centre on Tuesday. Newcastle host Spanish club Athletic Bilbao in a Champions League match on Wednesday. The Magpies have won two of their three fixtures, while Bilbao have managed to win only one match so far. Elsewhere on Wednesday, Manchester City face Borussia Dortmund while Barcelona travel to Belgium to play Club Brugge. Last year finalists Inter Milan will look to keep their winning run intact when they host winless Kairat Almaty of Kazakhstan and Jose Mourinho's Benfica lock horns with Bayer Leverkusen. Italian outfit Atalanta will be up against Olympique de Marseille while rock bottom Dutch side Ajax host Galatasaray.—Reuters

Clinical Gauff dominates to eliminate Paolini in WTA Finals

RIYADH: Defending champion Coco Gauff put on a clinical performance to beat Jasmine Paolini 6-3, 6-2 and eliminate the Italian as she registered her first win at the WTA Finals on Tuesday.

The 21-year-old, who made 17 double faults when she lost to fellow American Jessica Pegula in her first game in Group Steffi Graf on Sunday, committed only three double faults this time as she dominated the eighth seed.

"I knew today's win was important to keep myself in the tournament. If I lost, I would have been out," world number three Gauff said.

The American took just over 10 minutes to build a 3-0 lead in the first set before Paolini went through a nine-minute battle to fend off three break points and win her first game.

Paolini got a break but Gauff drew the Italian into backhand rallies and won points with precise cross-court shots to claim the next game and take a 5-3 lead before holding to win the set.

The French Open champion's strategy of making Paolini run constantly from one side of court to the other paid off again when Gauff got back-to-back breaks to go 5-2 up in the second.

She secured victory with a powerful serve that Paolini could only hit into the net.

"I thought I served smart... I don't think Jasmine was a 100% today," Gauff added.

In Monday's late match, Amanda Anisimova beat fellow American Madison Keys 4-6, 6-3, 6-2.

ITALY'S Jasmine Paolini plays a backhand return against Coco Gauff of the US during their WTA Finals match at the King Saud University Indoor Arena on Tuesday.—Reuters

Australian Open champion Keys made 12 double faults, four times more than her opponent as Anisimova bounced back from a first-set stumble to get her first win in the WTA Finals.

Anisimova was the first to hold her serve after the match started with four straight breaks, but the 24-year-old conceded another break as Keys took a 5-4 lead.

World number seven Keys won the first set with forceful serves and built a 2-0 lead in the second, but her struggles with double faults and unforced errors allowed Anisimova to get a break back and make it 3-3.

Fourth seed Anisimova broke again, fooling Keys with her well-timed forehand, and won five straight games to take the second set.

Keys looked exhausted as Anisimova, growing in confidence and finding success with cross-court shots, took just 34 minutes to win the third set.

"It was quite a battle out there. Just really happy with the way I was able to turn around in the second set and turn that frown upside down," said Anisimova, who was the runner-up in Wimbledon and the US Open this year.

Rybakina will face Keys in her last round-robin match, while Swiatek, who beat Keys on Saturday, takes on Anisimova.—Reuters

Emotional retirement will come soon: Ronaldo

LONDON: Cristiano Ronaldo has revealed he plans to retire "soon" as the Portugal and Al Nassr star prepares for a tearful end to his glittering career.

Ronaldo discussed his thoughts on retirement and his life after football in an interview with Piers Morgan Uncensored.

The 40-year-old, who has scored a remarkable 952 goals, is one of the most decorated players in the history of the game, but the end is in sight for his astonishing career.

Asked when he would consider hanging up his boots, Ronaldo, who is under contract with Al Nassr until 2027, replied: "Soon. But I think I will be prepared.

"It will be tough, of course. It will be difficult? Yes. Probably will cry, yes. I'm an open person. It will be very, very difficult, yes.

"But Piers, I prepare my future since 25, 26, 27 years old, I prepare my future. So I think I will be capable to support that pressure."

Ronaldo is confident he will be able to cope without football because he wants to focus on his family and his off the pitch interests.

"Nothing will be able to compare that the adrenaline that we have for football to score a goal," he said.

"But everything has a beginning, and everything has an end. I have other passions. I'm going to have more time for me, I'm going to have more time for my family to raise my kids.

"I want to follow Cristiano Junior because he's at an age when kids do stupid things. I was the same. Mateo loves football as well.

"I want to do more fun things. I love playing Padel with my closest friends. We are getting quite good."

After starting his career with Sporting Lisbon, Ronaldo enjoyed successful spells at Manchester United and Real Madrid, Juventus.

He won three Premier League titles and the Champions League among other trophies in his first stint in Manchester.

Ronaldo joined Saudi Pro League side Al Nassr after leaving United for a second time in 2022.

He still looks out for the Premier League club's results, given his affinity with their current manager — his former Portugal team-mate Ruben Amorim.

But the five-time Ballon d'Or winner warned United fans to not expect miracles from Amorim, who is in the midst of a rollercoaster reign at Old Trafford following his arrival 12 months ago.

"He's doing his best," Ronaldo said. "What are you going to do? Miracles. Miracles are impossible.

"He's not going to do miracles. They have good players but they don't have, some of them, in mind what Manchester United is.

"Manchester United is still in my heart. I love that club. But we have all to be honest and look for ourselves and say, 'Listen, they are not in a good path'.

So, they need to change and it's not only about the coach and players, in my opinion."—AFP

Djokovic to play at ATP Finals, says Italy tennis chief

ROME: Novak Djokovic has confirmed his participation at the ATP Finals in Turin, Italy's tennis federation chief Angelo Binaghi said, easing concerns that the 24-time Grand Slam champion may pull out of the season finale.

World number five Djokovic, who withdrew from the season ender last year due to injury, skipped the Paris Masters and has not played since losing to qualifier Valentin Vacherot in the Shanghai Masters semi-finals last month.

"We have confirmation that Djokovic will be in Turin," Binaghi told Italian radio channel Rai Gr Parlamento on Monday.

The Nov 9-16 ATP finals feature the world's top eight players, with Djokovic having won the tournament a record seven times and last lifting the trophy in 2023.

The 38-year-old Serb's participation leaves just one qualifying slot open, with ninth-ranked Italian Lorenzo Musetti and eighth-ranked Canadian Felix Auger-Aliassime in contention.

Auger-Aliassime, who reached the Paris Masters final last week, withdrew from the Moselle Open in Metz on Monday, meaning Musetti could seal the last spot if he wins this week's ATP 250 tournament in Athens.—Reuters

Shahid, Sajjad cruise into worlds last-16

DOHA: Pakistan's national snooker champion Shahid Aftab and compatriot Mohammad Sajjad powered into the last 16 of the IBSF World Snooker Championship on Tuesday with commanding victories in the round-of-32.

Shahid shrugged off a slow start to defeat Bahrain's Punait Saqer 4-1, while Sajjad, who received a bye into this round, overcame Poland's Krzysztof Czapnik by the same margin in the first stage of the tournament in Doha.

The 43-year-old Shahid found himself on the back foot after losing the first frame 55-30.

However, he responded in devastating fashion, levelling the match with a dominant 79-6 victory in the second frame, which included a superb break of 79.

He carried that momentum forward, taking the next two frames 76-9 and 64-48 to seize control of the contest. Shahid sealed his victory convincingly by claiming the fifth frame 64-18, booking his place in the next round.

Sajjad also dropped his opening frame against Czapnik, losing 74-40. The Pakistani cueist dug deep to edge a tight second frame 71-60 and level the match.

He continued to apply pressure, winning two closely-fought frames 52-46 and 55-42 to move to the brink of victory. Sajjad then saved his best for last, wrapping up the match in spectacular fashion with a stunning 118-0 frame win, fuelled by a break of 114.—Agencies

Girls opening-round matches decided

ISLAMABAD: Several matches of the girls' singles category were played in the ITF Pakistan World Junior Tennis Championship J-60 here at the PTF-SDA Tennis Complex on Tuesday.

"This is the first time a J-60 tournament is being held in Pakistan. Next year, we plan to host two J-60 tournaments and five J-30 events," PTF president Aisam-ul-Haq said.

Due to rain in Islamabad, the unfinished matches will be completed on Wednesday morning.

On Monday, Pakistan's Abdul Basit defeated Chanapat of Thailand in their boys' singles first-round match. Basit won 1-6, 7-5, 6-3.

Players from China, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Lithuania, Russia, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Nepal and hosts Pakistan, are participating in the tournament.

Tuesday's results:

Girls' singles (first round): Karolina Ligai (Kazakhstan) bt Rania Busz (US) 6-0, 6-0; Haniya Aman Minhas (Saudi Arabia) bt Zunaisah Noor (Pakistan) 6-0, 6-0; Serife Pelin Sari (Turkey) bt Amna Ali (Pakistan) 6-2, 6-0; Deniz Cakil (Turkey) bt Zara Khan (Pakistan) 6-0, 6-0; Ecrin Lal Yavuz (Turkey) bt Soha Ali (Pakistan) 6-0, 6-1; Yewon Lee (Korea) bt Ayris Tokac (Turkey) 6-1, 6-4; Polina Barbanova (Kazakhstan) bt Eyu Yoshida (Japan) 6-2, 6-2; Varvara Rubeatsova (Russia) bt Zihan Feng (China) 6-4, 6-2

Monday's results:

Boys' singles (first round): Theodor Kraytchev (Britain) bt Bilal Awais Janjua (Pakistan) 6-0, 6-0; Napradh Lalai (Thailand) bt Abdaar Ali (Pakistan) 6-0, 6-0; Kristijonas Milasauskas (Lithuania) bt Nabeel Ali Qayum (Pakistan) 6-2, 6-1; Mohammad Haziq Aasim bt Inam Qadir (Pakistan) 6-2, 6-3; Zohaib Afzal Malik bt Mohammad Yahya (Pakistan) 4-6, 6-3, 6-1; Asad Zaman bt Razik Sultan (Pakistan) 6-2, 6-3; Hamza Roman bt Amir Mazari 6-0, 6-2; Abdul Basit (Pakistan) bt Chanapat (Thailand) 1-6, 7-5, 6-3; Mohammad Hassan Usmani bt Ahtesham Humayun (Pakistan) 6-4, 6-2. —Sports Reporter

Coach dies during Serbian top-flight match

BELGRADE: Serbian top-flight club FK Radnicki 1923's coach Mladen Zizovic died during a league match on Monday, the club said in a statement on social media.

Media reports said Zizovic, 44, suffered a heart attack during the first half at Mladost Lucani.

Former Bosnia midfielder Zizovic was appointed as the Radnicki 1923 head coach less than two weeks ago.

"Our club has lost not only a great professional, but above all a good man, a friend, and a sportsman who, with his knowledge, energy, and nobility, has left a deep mark on the hearts of all who knew him," the club said in a statement.

Zizovic was rushed to the hospital after his collapse. Several players broke down crying on the pitch and the Serbian SuperLiga match was abandoned when the news of his death reached officials.

"His untimely departure represents a tremendous loss for the entire football community," the Serbian football association (FSS) said in a statement.—Reuters

Fiorentina sack Pioli

ROME: Serie A strugglers Fiorentina dismissed coach Stefano Pioli on Tuesday with the club bottom of the table after a 10-match winless run to start the season.

Fiorentina are off to their worst top-flight start in club history, picking up just four points so far after finishing sixth last season.

Pioli, 60, returned to Fiorentina for a second spell in July after less than a year in charge of Saudi side Al-Nassr. Before that he spent five years at AC Milan but left at the end of the 2023-24 season.

He becomes the third coach in Serie A to lose his job this term. Juventus moved on from Igor Tudor last week while Genoa parted ways with Patrick Vieira.

Fiorentina named Daniele Galloppa as his replacement on a temporary basis but are reportedly considering Roberto D'Aversa, who has coached Parma, Lecce and Empoli, and former Torino boss Paolo Vanoli as the successor to Pioli.—AFP

Xhaka lifts Sunderland into fourth after Everton draw

SUNDERLAND: Sunderland climbed into the Premier League's top four after Granit Xhaka's deflected strike salvaged a 1-1 draw at home to Everton on Monday.

The Black Cats would have moved up to second with victory, but were outplayed in the first half and trailed to Iliman Ndiaye's brilliant individual effort.

Everton were left to regret not making more of their first half dominance as Thierno Barry missed a glorious chance and Jack Grealish hit the post.

Sunderland took less than a minute of the second period to hit back when Xhaka's strike flicked off James Tarkowski to beat England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford on his return to the Stadium of Light.

The home side then looked the more likely to claim all three points but Wilson Isidor fluffed Sunderland's best chance to snatch victory.

"The first 25 minutes was not good enough," Xhaka told Sky Sports. "At this level, you get punished but the second half was very good."

A point at least maintains Sunderland's unbeaten home record and their impressive start to a first top flight campaign in eight seasons.

Everton edge five points clear of the bottom three in 14th, but the Toffees glaring lack of a prolific number nine again cost them victory.

"For 20 to 30 minutes I thought I'd be disappointed going home with a point. By the end of the game, I was pleased we got a point from it," said Everton boss David Moyes.

"We missed a big chance to make it 2-0 and because we don't get that it gave Sunderland a bit of confidence and gave the crowd something to get behind."

A moment of magic gave the visitors the lead on 15 minutes as Ndiaye danced his way through four Sunderland defenders before firing into the top corner for his fourth goal of the season.

Grealish then hit the post from long range but it is Barry's miss that will live long in the memories of the travelling support heading back to Merseyside.

The Frenchman has still yet to score since his 27 million ($35 million) move from Villarreal in July and will not get a better chance than when he sliced horribly off target with the goal gaping at the back post from Grealish's cross.

Despite a sub-par first 45 minutes, Sunderland were level within 44 seconds of the second half when Xhaka netted his first goal since joining from Bayer Leverkusen.

A share of the spoils takes Sunderland above Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea and level on points with Liverpool.

But they will need to be much better to protect their unbeaten run at the Stadium of Light when leaders Arsenal visit on Saturday.—AFP

EVERTON'S Iliman Ndiaye shoots to score against Sunderland during the Premier League match at The Stadium of Light.—AFP